In Their Words—
Fathers Tell Their Stories

"My most important dream is that someday my son will be as proud of me as I am of him."

You try to find and keep a job. Pay child support, and become the breadwinner you were taught all men should be. However, you remember the past: convictions, high school dropout, gangs, drugs, recovery, and then more drugs. Violence, frustration and then more violence.

Do your children and their mother hear another promise, one eventually broken and added to the heap, which is now evidence that you are deadbeat and incorrigible?

You realize that deciding to change—to become a better father—is hard, but actually doing it is even tougher. Nonetheless, you decide to transform your life. You decide to take action: call someone, go somewhere, read something. You are a father, and you have decided to be a better one.

Every father who's entered a fatherhood program has had to take this risk: overtly try to be a better father and risk failure. In doing so, he must admit that he needs help. He must trust strangers. He must face a spotty past, failed relationships. In some cases, he also must face public systems—child support enforcement or the courts—that he has worked hard to avoid.

He is not guaranteed success by joining a fatherhood program, but an effective program may give him the tools to stay committed to change. The fatherhood program teaches him how to better communicate with his children and their mother; it provides correct information about how the child support enforcement system works; it opens the door to education and employment training; and it helps the father find a job.

In short, the fatherhood program facilitates his transformation process. Individuals who work in the programs may continue to inspire it, but the program's job is to enable the father to achieve it.

Daryl, Vontaye, Ozzie, David and Eddie are fathers. They are men in the midst of change. Each is a participant in a fatherhood program. Each has a story. Each, in his own eyes, has achieved some mark of success, and each attributes some of it to his respective program.

Collectively, their stories provide a glimpse of what a fatherhood program can help men accomplish. Their stories, however, are not unique. Other fathers experience difficulty being responsible parents, but they remain silent. Sometimes they find success on their own, but all too often they eventually continue their pattern of silence and avoidance—deciding their families are better off without them.

Some will ask, "What would have happened to Daryl, Vontaye, Ozzie, David or Eddie without the assistance of a fatherhood program?" There is no unequivocal answer, but one thing is certain: without the support of these programs, each would have been on his own, leaving his children's future that much more precarious.

Daryl and Vontaye

Leaving prison after three years, Daryl—a 39-year-old man with deep lines creasing his face and pleading, soft eyes—knew he had struggles in front of him. Would the drugs that lured him, the streets that pulled him, the joblessness that haunted him seize him once again? Was prison a temporary escape from these forces or a permanent one? At the suggestion of a caseworker for the Department of Corrections, Daryl turned to a program for fathers. Daryl said he hoped the program would help him get skill training, a job, and support for avoiding drugs and alcohol. Nevertheless, it is another aspect of the program—the one that Daryl did not think he needed—that has made the most difference, he said. The parenting classes held every Saturday morning on the fourth floor of an old city college have transformed Daryl from being a presence in his children's lives to being a nurturer to them. "For the first time I was listening to their hearts," he said. "I was connecting to them on an emotional level."

Compared with Daryl, Vontaye, who is 23, looks like a fresh-faced college student. A social worker also referred him to the program. After two years of being banished from the lives of his two young daughters, by his ex-girlfriend Vontaye got a call from the Department of Children and Family Services. They were taking the girls from their mother, the caseworker said, and then asked him if he would be willing to care for the children, Vontaye said. The 24-year-old said he was happy to take the 6- and 7-year-old girls.

"When I did not see them, I was depressed," he said. "I was frustrated all the time. It became real stressful. I didn't want my kids to grow up saying, 'I hate my dad.'"

The Department of Children and Family Services social worker suggested to Vontaye that he go to the father's program to get the parenting skills he needed to gain custody of the two girls. Vontaye, who is the primary caretaker for the girls, said he knows he has a

difficult task in front of him. "I am both the mother and the father," Vontaye said. "I have to know what to say to them when they are sad."

Vontaye recalled coming home recently to find his youngest daughter crying. Vontaye said she told him that she missed her mother. Vontaye's response is a testament to the difference a fatherhood program can make. "I went to the telephone and called her mother and said, "Your daughter wants to talk to you,'" he said. "After they talked, I told my daughter that at this time your mother needs to get something done, but she is not lost from your life. She is not gone forever."

The Saturday morning classes also have taught him the emotional things that are important to children, such as listening to them talk, being consistent and keeping promises. "The class has changed my mind thought," he said. "They have taught me how to treat them. Now, my children are enjoying life again. They are just fun kids. I enjoy seeing them happy."

Vontaye had to find a way to explain to two young children a hard situation without the involvement of their mother. For Daryl, dealing with his wife is what causes difficulty.

"I didn't want my kids to grow up saying, 'I hate my dad.'"

Daryl said that before he went into prison he thought he was a father to his sons by simply being a figure in their lives. He lived with them and provided what he could.

By the time he was released from prison, however, the situation had changed. His children's mother had moved in with a new man and she was pregnant with the other man's child. Daryl couldn't go home and he was distraught over the breakup.

It wasn't until he began attending the parenting classes that Daryl understood that the breakup of the relationship was hurting his sons more than it was him. The classes also gave Daryl a way to talk to his sons. Realizing that being a parent is more than just being a provider has made Daryl critical of his children's mother. Recently, he witnessed his wife slap their 12-year-old son. In the past, Daryl said the slap might not have bothered him. But now, because of what he learned in the program, it did. "I asked her, 'Why did you do that?'" Daryl said. "Me and him just left. She doesn't understand. That wasn't right." Daryl now says that as soon as he gets an apartment of his own he would like to get custody of his sons.

Daryl is not, however, just trying to climb his way back into the role of father. He also has to reestablish himself at work. The employment trainer at the program referred him to a 45-week apprenticeship program to learn a trade, and Daryl attends classes to learn how to interview to get a job. "I was anxious about getting a new start," he said. "But I wanted to do it. I want my kids off welfare. They have been on it all of their lives."

During the time Vontaye didn't see his children, he said he didn't pay child support formally, but he often gave money to his daughter's relatives and asked that they get it to the children. Although Vontaye says he has held a job since high school, he was recently laid off. He is now going to school for typing and computer classes. The support of the employment part of the program is important, Vontaye said.

Vontaye rejects the image of deadbeat dads. Contrary to the picture of a father who does nothing for his children, he has gone beyond participating in his children's upbringing, and actually has become a primary caretaker. "The image of deadbeat dads sickens me," Vontaye said. "So many men want to be fathers, but get the opportunity taken away from them."

Both Vontaye and Daryl say they know many fathers who aren't providing for their children like they should. They say these men would be helped by a program that focuses on fathers.

"I have to say that [participating in the fatherhood program] has been a wonderful experience," Vontaye said. "At first I was sort of skeptical and they proved me wrong."

Ozzie

To look at Ozzie, who is now 19, it is hard to imagine him being locked up when he was 14. Then, he was tough on the outside and scared on the inside. For most observers, jail should be scary; and for young offenders, it should change their direction in life. However, for Ozzie, like many juvenile offenders, serving time did not change his life.

"The first time I was arrested, I was scared. I was lonely," he said. "They took away my freedom, my sense of life, but it didn't change me because I got used to being locked up."

Not only did incarceration become bearable, it had an upside. Ozzie was able to get the attention he wanted from his mother. "She visited me, called, and we talked a lot more then than before I got locked up," he said.

The story of how Ozzie ended up in jail is a familiar one. His father abandoned his mother when Ozzie was a child. His mother, trying to make ends meet, worked long hours, leaving little time to care for her son. Ozzie joined a gang, looking for a more intact and secure family. The result was a youthful string of petty crime: vandalizing property, curfew violation, and so on. Ozzie spent most of his 14th year in jail. Three days after being released—his mother's birthday—he was arrested

What Mothers Say

Eight women—all mothers—convene to talk about the fathers of their children. They each have a story that cannot be told in a mere two hours among strangers. Yet, each women has agreed to talk because she understands that more people—from politicians to their colleagues at work—are beginning to rethink the role of fathers, especially fathers who do not live with their children.

All these women were in relationships they described as once loving—a relationship they thought would last a lifetime. Regardless of when the children appeared, at some point the relationship started to break down. For some there were incidents of infidelity, domestic violence or a lack of money, but each woman described the breakdown of her relationship in the most basic terms: "We realized we wanted different things in life."

The overflow of their lives is easily seen with just a glance, and yet still hidden is the experience that allows each woman to unequivocally agree with Roz's declarations: "I want a partner, someone who is equally committed to raising my child. I don't care if we are together as couple or not."

Each of these women had to deal with the breakdown of her relationship. Each woman struggled for control of her children. Each is trying to understand what is best for her children. Each is trying to manage the day-to-day rearing of children.

"I want a partner, someone who is equally committed to raising my child. I don't care if we are together as couple or not."

"I hated my child's father for the longest. I thought, 'How could he leave?' I mean I know we weren't doing so okay, but we had a baby and he supposedly loved her," said Roz.

"I really was mad. But, you know, I was also hurt. So when he, after we broke up, would try to come and see her I was like his worst nightmare. And at first, when he stopped coming around, I was happy. But he wasn't happy and my daughter wasn't happy, so I had to forget my feelings," said Roz, who never married.

Once the break-up became a reality, the disappointment of a failed relationship made managing the rearing of children very difficult. Like Roz, Rebecca—who is now divorced—felt at first that her area of control was over the children.

"He just up and left, moved out, and started a new life as a single man. I am still responsible for a child. I still have to give the bath each day, prepare food, take the bus to day care and then go to work. I'm left to do this alone, and he wants to drop by and play," said Rebecca.

"The way I see it now, it's like we have a business. Our business is our child. He has a role, and I have one."

"I didn't care if he was giving me money or not. I was not going to just let my baby's father be a playmate. You know, at first he would bring by toys every time [he came to see the child], and I was left looking like the evil mother, always nagging, never no fun," she said.

The other women agreed. The bottom line: the mothers were and felt like mothers every day, while the fathers were made special by their absence. According to Adriana, who is a never-married mother of a 7-year-old girl, the struggle for control is based on a simple fact: "Because fathers are thought to be deadbeat all the time, if my child's father shows up I'm supposed to jump for joy and thank God. His presence alone doesn't mean he's automatically in charge. But my mother and everybody else say I should be happy. I don't think so."

Some women have reached a healing point of understanding. The impetus for this move, more often than not, was due to their children, especially if the children were older. "I probably wouldn't be here talking about this if it weren't for my sons," said Cheryl, a never married mother of two boys. "They started pushing me on how me and their father got along. It made me think that if I don't work out the problems we have, they're not going to learn a thing."

Among the women who had positive working relationships with the fathers of their children, there was agreement that long-term success was rooted in their ability to maintain an open line of communication and have clear discernment of their individual roles and responsibilities. "The way I see it now, it's like we have a business. Our business is our child. He has a role, and I have one," said Roz.

For Marissa, who is a never-married mother of a 3-year-old boy, team parenting means each person keeping their end of an agreement. "Once we got to the point where we knew we were through romantically, we had to discuss the what, when and how as it related to our son. It's not just who pays for what, but who's going to pick him up from day care each day. We talk about everything when it comes to our son. Even if it may not seem like any of my business, if he has him for the week, I ask him 'Where are you going to be? Who else is going to be there?' Before we got counseling, he would never answer questions like this, but now I think he knows why I ask in the first place."

Should there be special programs for fathers? The mothers do not hesitate to answer this question: Yes, why not—just don't forget about us.

Never-married and divorced fathers often feel disregarded by their families and by society. They struggle to locate their place as a parent. Responsible fatherhood programs help them find that place. The eight mothers gathered here agree that their counterparts could use some support. Their only concern, as stated by Roz, "…is that [fatherhood programs] don't take us back to that battle for control."

again. "It was the influence of friends. We were going to get some burritos to celebrate my release when we stole a car. My mother couldn't believe it. It was her birthday," he recalled.

Today, Ozzie sits in a conference room at the fatherhood program, which accomplished what jail could not—turn his life around.

He's dressed professionally, but not to the point where other young men might see him as different; Ozzie must now convince them that the program can help them as well. As the lead educational specialist for the program, Ozzie is responsible for recruiting other young fathers into the program, and for teaching the things that will help them be better men, better fathers. He teaches fathers to become men who adhere the traditional principle of *Palabra*—men who keep their prom-

ises to their families, their community and themselves.

Ozzie did not want to go back to jail. He wanted someone to help him turn his life around. "I was glad when I was released one week later and placed on house arrest. The court made me and my mother attend parenting classes. But the classes weren't much, and my probation officer didn't provide much help to me. I felt I needed a role model," he said.

However, Ozzie didn't find that role model he longed for through juvenile justice system or at home. Instead, he found her at a party. She was 18, when he, now 15—but lying about his age—asked her to dance. "She filled that emotional void I had," Ozzie said.

This dance changed Ozzie's life. He found someone who listened to him, who cared about him. And, eventually, someone who would tell him that she thought she might be pregnant. "My son's mother thought I was going to be scared when she told me. But I was happy, and she was scared. I jumped for joy, but I did wonder, "How are we going to do it?"

Ozzie had a plan. "I asked my girlfriend to move in with me, without asking my mother. My mom was really mad. My game plan was to stay there for a couple of months, and I would slow down a little, make myself a little less visible in the street."

Ozzie's plan quickly stalled. Ozzie's mother moved away to be with his father. He and his girlfriend, left homeless, eventually moved in with her family. Ozzie struggled to find a job on his own, but he was unsuccessful.

The difficult housing arrangement, coupled with his inability to find work, soon took a toll on Ozzie's relationship with his child's mother. "My child's mother was in Job Corps at the time, and I was at home babysitting," he said. "Still, I was looking for work, and one day I was reading the *Penny Saver* (a local community newspaper) when I saw an ad for a program for young fathers. What got my attention was that it said it could help fathers find jobs," he said. Ozzie decided to call the program's number, but he was unsure about the fatherhood aspect of the program. "I was mainly concerned with getting a job referral, not the fatherhood stuff. I thought to myself, 'I'll just try it out, but soon as I get a job, I'll detach myself from whatever program they make me go to,'" he said.

To his surprise, it was the fatherhood stuff that made him stick with the program. "I didn't have a dad, so I didn't really know what made one. I stayed with the program because of the character of the people," he said. "They (program staff) made me feel welcomed. Any other place would just see me as a gang member. But they accepted me here."

Ozzie set his mind to take advantage of the program. He would attend meetings, be a good father and follow the rules. Doing so, however, would soon create a critical point for him and the program.

"I was ready to do the right thing, you know. But when I went to re-enroll in school, I was arrested on the spot for an outstanding warrant. I did three weeks," he said.

Ozzie and the program passed the test. Ozzie survived another setback, and the program gained his trust. "The program accepted my collect calls from jail. They talked to me and they were concerned with how I was doing. And by the time I got out, I really knew they cared," he said.

Ozzie continued to do his part. He attended group sessions and started an independent study program to complete high school. He learned to care for his child. He learned to communicate and understand his emotions. Still, when it came to finding a steady job, Ozzie kept coming up empty-handed. "I'd fill out job applications at Carl's Jr., McDonald's, and everywhere else. I'd come back home every day to hear the answering machine say, 'You have no messages.' This created a lot of conflict between me and my child's mother. She'd say, 'You don't do nothing.'

"I was unable to find employment, but I kept hanging around the program—I wouldn't go away. So I started working with the program. I would present information to other fathers, helping them learn their rights. I also helped with outreach for the program, and I learned to be a community health educator," he said. "Presenting was easy

NCSL advisory committee members Senator Elaine Szymoniak, Commissioner Pat Wilson-Coker and Daniel Ash participate in a peer support group about communication skills.

for me because I love attention. Going public was easy."

Ozzie never did come home to hear a prospective employer say he had been hired. Fortunately, however, he had demonstrated a talent to connect with other fathers who also saw the program's newspaper ad and decided to check out the program. The people who had helped Ozzie change his life hired him to do the same for other young fathers.

Ozzie knows that the program cannot hire every father who's unable to find work. Fatherhood programs, he admits, must do more to convince employers to look beyond the background checks and tattoos, and give more young men a chance. For him, though, the rejection of other employers led to a possible career. "My job means everything to me. I feel really good for myself and about being a father," he said.

David and Eddie

David knew his life was at a standstill. The 34-year-old father of one girl, age 12, had quit "drinking and drugging"—indeed, a first step to improving his life, but still he was slowly becoming, in his words, "a couch potato."

In March 1999, David sat on his sister's couch, watching a now-forgotten television show, when two outreach workers from a local fatherhood program knocked on the door. "I thought it was undercover police," David said. "I took their brochure and put it in the trash." David returned to his couch. A few moments passed, and then he heard for the first time something that the woman who had delivered the brochure said: "We can help find jobs for fathers." Without taking the time to put on his shoes, David ran out the door and found the recruiters still on his block. Out of breath, but happy they had not gone far, David asked them to explain their program. David tells this part of his story with a smile on his face while sitting in the program's office—a converted housing development apartment. The rugged past shows through, despite his attempt to conceal it through the neatly pressed shirt and tie. It's obvious that he's happy to be "part of something positive."

Man-to-man: advisory committee member Representative John Martinez and a Parents' Fair Share participant.

Eddie, also 34, is sitting next to David. He is dressed in black, wearing a turtleneck shirt with a jogging suit. A gold cross hangs around his neck.

Eddie, the father of six children—all girls—is sitting straight up in a small office chair; his long legs stretch across the small room. His eyes are always on the person talking, a clear indication to all—including David—that he is attentive.

As Eddie begins to explain how he ended up in this fatherhood program, he leans forward as if he intends to whisper. He doesn't. Instead, he speaks firmly and clearly.

"In 1997, while in prison, God gave me the call to preach his ministry. I told everyone I would become a minister. When I got out of jail, I had a good job, plenty of money, cars and women. But God broke me. One day I ended up at the Gospel Rescue Ministries. I joined their Change Point Ministry. They teach you how to be a follower of Christ, and that's where I met Mr. Jenkins (he runs the fatherhood program). He wanted to help me, but I was very resistant to him at first because he was trying to evaluate me and I don't like that. I became close to Mrs. Jenkins much quicker; she had the qualities of my mother, the kindness of my mother. She was also stern like my mother."

"I didn't have a dad, so I didn't really know what made one."

When Eddie is done speaking, he leans back in his chair. He looks at everyone in the room, surveying for a visual indication that each had heard and understood him. Of course, he knew there was much more to tell, but he wanted everyone in the room to understand his starting point—religion.

Two men, one program. One is looking for work. The other has found God. Both are fathers who rarely saw their children. Both are fathers in the process of changing their lives.

Respectively, their experiences are clear examples of what fatherhood programs can do if they are flexible and able to do a little of everything. Fatherhood programs help men like David who are unemployed, have had to overcome personal problems like substance abuse, and are deciding what to do with the rest of their life.

"I lost my job because the nursing home shut down," David said. "I was in my eighth year of recovery, and my goals for 1999 were to get closer to God and my daughter. I needed a change."

Fatherhood programs can teach fathers that putting their lives in order is not

complete without acknowledging their roles as a parent. For many fathers, like Eddie, this effort takes time.

"While coming into the ministry, I didn't see how a class [on fatherhood] would play a role. When I went to the class, they would put their stuff on you, but I ignored it. I would just sit and read the bible," Eddie said.

Both men, because of the efforts of program staff, eventually understood how reconnecting with their children was integral to their other goals. Due to the program, David realized that seeing his daughter every three years or so, yet consistently paying child support, was no longer enough.

"It's important that I be there for her, be in her life. My daughter said to me, 'I don't care if you buy me stuff at the mall, I just want you to be there with me,'" he said. Since joining the program, David talks to his daughter every Sunday, and he is hoping to establish a visitation order.

For Eddie, participating in the program convinced him that reconciliation with his children and their mothers was important to his journey to becoming a minister. "I had reconnected with my children after three years; their mother had been hiding from me because I had been real bad to her. She was like a time bomb, but I understood. I had done a lot of hurt."

"It's been a bumpy road, but [program staff] have been there as I unite with my children, just as they were there for my trial sermon," Eddie said.

It is not easy to reunite a father with his children. When a father is absent, children still grow and experience life. The father now becomes a stranger, and the children become uncertain.

The father must temper his new-found enthusiasm for parenting, understanding that his children may need time to adjust. In his case, Eddie had to accept that his past—no matter how far away it seemed to him—still played a role in his relationship with his children.

"My daughter said to me, 'I don't care if you buy me stuff at the mall, I just want you to be there with me.'"

"I asked myself, 'How do I go forward, after asking for forgiveness.' My two oldest children had been hurt during my absence; one had been raped, the other was molested. Had I been the proper father, maybe these things would not have happened.

"Because of my past with the mother and the children's trauma, I had to visit my children at a supervised center. I wish I could have seen them without people gawking at me," Eddie said.

The fatherhood program helped Eddie deal with this arrangement. "I found that the program, if you stick with it, helps you have a chance. The meetings with other fathers, discussing how to be with their kids, how to talk to them, and how to deal with visitation, lets me know that I'm not alone. You learn and grow from each other," he said.

There is no blueprint on how to be a father. There is no simple step-by-step guide to follow when building a fatherhood program. For both the individual father and the enterprising program, learning is gained through experience.

Each father will take a different path. For Daryl, Vontaye, Ozzie, Eddie and David, it was unemployment, incarceration, a religious awakening, or the threat of losing their parental rights that led them to re-think their role as father. Regardless of where they started, each father found a program designed not only to help him overcome his respective problem, but one built on the notion that fathers are important to their children.

The fatherhood aspect of the programs is the glue that keeps each one involved, makes them persistent, and pushes them to a family-focused viewpoint. In addition, it is the relationships they build with other fathers that keep them honest about their goals and their progress, and in their actions.

The increasing number of fatherhood programs do not do anything magical. They simply give men a place to go when they need help. They give men a reason to work harder than they have ever worked before. They give fathers the support they need to change, to find success.

Without the help of a fatherhood program, could these men have succeeded? Possibly, yet it would have come outside the context of family, outside the energizing support of other fathers. In any other program, success for David would mean to find him a job—end of story. In a fatherhood program, his and the program's success are measured, in part, by his confession on how the program changed his life. "My life, before I entered this program, was lonely," David said.

—By Daniel O. Ash, consultant, Partners For Fragile Families Demonstration